



Discovery of Ascension Island by Portuguese navigator João da Nova - March 25, 1501

Vasanth

Editorial team

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Ascension Island was discovered by the Portuguese seafarer Joao da Nova Castella in 1501, and "found again" two years later on Ascension Day by Alphonse d'Albuquerque, who gave the island its name. Ascension was an arid island, buffeted by dry trade winds from southern Africa. The Island is 90 kilometers square, almost half way between South America and Africa. It is devoid of trees at the time of Darwin and Hooker's visits, the little rain that did fall quickly evaporated away. It was created just one million years ago from the hot magma of an underwater volcano along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, and up until 1850, Ascension was a barren wasteland of lava fields. It will remain uninhabited until the incarceration of Napoleon, the Emperor, at St-Helena in 1815. The British, fearing an attempt to free the Emperor, claimed ownership over Ascension so as to establish a naval garrison on the site formerly destined to Georgetown. During the following years, the British troop changed the whole place into a little town with houses built in stones, a fortress, a hospital and a shop store. In 1821, when Napoleon died, Ascension became a one-stop station for the provision of supplies and was used as quarantine grounds for crews with yellow fever.

Under naval occupation, Ascension became an established imperial outpost, and was a rest stop for scientist explorers like Charles Darwin and Joseph Dalton Hooker. It was the botanist Hooker, at the encouragement of Darwin, who would devise a plan that would radically change the island's habitability in what was one of the most successful ecological experiments of all time. In 1847, Hooker, with help from his father who directed the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew, arranged for trees to be shipped to the island. The idea was that the planted trees would capture rain and makes the soil fertile, transforming the barren landscape into a lush garden. Year after year, new varieties of trees arrived from botanical gardens in Europe, South Africa, and Argentina. By the late 1870s, the island was home to Norfolk pines, eucalyptus, bamboo, and banana trees.

Ascension Island is a tiny leftover of empire, a volcanic island 700 miles from anywhere. It is dominated by a US military airbase, which more than 100 aircraft passed through on security duties during Barack Obama's recent trip to Africa. There are satellites and submarine tracking stations, a BBC transmitter, and a listening post run by GCHQ's Composite Signals Organisation.

By Napoleon's death in 1821 Ascension had become a victualling station and sanatorium for ships engaged in the suppression of the slave trade around the West African coast. In 1823 the island was taken over by the Royal Marines. It remained under the supervision of the British Board of Admiralty until 1922, when it was made a Dependency of St Helena by Royal Letters Patent. It ceased to be a military only island in 1899 when the Eastern Telegraph Company arrived. From 1922 until 1964 the island was managed by the Eastern Telegraph Company (renamed Cable and Wireless in 1934). In 1964, in view of plans to establish BBC and Composite Signals Organisation (CSO) stations, an Administrator was appointed. (During the Second World War the St Helena Government was similarly represented on the island). In 1967 a NASA tracking station was built and supported the Apollo lunar landing programme. Although this has since closed down NASA operations such as the Space Shuttle continue to be supported from Ascension by the USAF. In 1982 the Island supported operations in the Falkland Islands and a RAF detachment continues to operate on the island in support of the Falklands garrison and the South Atlantic Airbridge operation.

While Ascension Island remains relatively unknown, its legacy may eventually prove to be profoundly important to humans' survival; the success of the island's artificial ecosystem, which is one of few large-scale planned forests in the world, has given hope to those that believe the colonization of Mars is necessary.